



# OSMANIA COURIER

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## Women journalists' meet stresses need for unfettered media

Fronia Priscilla

The media's right to freedom of expression must be upheld whether it involves prominent media houses or lesser known journalists working in inaccessible areas and, who are at risk. This was one of the several concerns expressed through a press release at the conclusion of the 12th national conference of Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI), held at the ICSSR Hall, Osmania University, from November 11 to 13, 2016.

NWMI expressed concern over growing intolerance towards freedom of expression, which is as much a fundamental right of the media as that of citizens. Journalists have been jailed for simply doing their job of reporting, sometimes even killed, it said.

Further, it voiced concern over the state of siege under which the media finds itself, citing examples of a journalist being shot dead in Bihar; assaults by the police in Tamil Nadu; the proposed one-day attempted ban on NDTV India; a similar ban ordered on the Assam TV channel, News Time; and the over-one-month ban on the daily Kashmir Reader.

"Journalists are facing threats – direct or veiled – from powerful sections such as caste groups, political parties, corporate houses

and even lawyers. Several journalists have even lost their lives in the past one year. They also face restrictions on what they can report, with media managements instructing them to tailor their stories to market demands and political agendas," the NWMI press release said.

The NWMI hoped that society would recognise that the intimidating atmosphere in which journalists work today poses a threat to people's right to be informed. The media managements failed to stand up for their employees and contributors though they felt their stories are worth being published. Be it false cases filed under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, or Section 153(A) IPC, or defamation cases filed by the Tamil Nadu government, the journalists are left to fight on their own, the release noted.

The NWMI found it unfair that while incidents regarding the media in Delhi and in big metros are widely covered, assaults on journalists in the remote areas – tribal pockets of Chhattisgarh and Odisha – remain relatively under-reported.

During the three-day national meet, prominent journalists like Malini Subramaniam, Ammu Joseph, Jyoti Punwani, Kalpana Sharma, Laxmi Murthy and several others spoke on the various



(From left) Linda Chhakchhuak, Malini Subramaniam, Rohini Mohan, and Nishitha Jha at the 12th National Conference of Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) recently.



aspects of the media, focussing on the challenges faced by women journalists in India.

Jeya Rani, Akash Poyam and Jayanthi Burudu added critical insights to the discourse, narrating the experiences of Dalits and Adi-

vasis who were treated differently, and had to struggle to make a mark for themselves in mainstream media. Journalists Sudipto Mondal and Uma Sudhir also shared their experiences. Vyjayanti Vasanta, a transgender activist, condemned the "invisibilisation" of sexual violence on the queer community.

On the sidelines of the conference, the NWMI souvenir was released at the Press Club, Soma-

jiguda. Well-known danseuse Rakeshwari Sainath and her troupe performed a Bharatanatyam ballet, 'Gandhari', written by Vasanth Kannabiran.

The three-day conference was flagged off with co-host Prof. K. Stevenson, Head, Department of Communication & Journalism, OU, welcoming the 70 women journalists from across the country, local journalists, and journalism students who participated. ■



## Transgender activist's personal struggle spurs social activism

"The word 'transgender' objectifies us. We are 'transgender people'!" Vyjayanti Vasanta Mogli, a transgender activist, was quick to correct this student reporter during an interview at the Press Club of Hyderabad, Somajiguda.

Participating in the session on 'Gender and Media: Continuities and Discontinuities' at the Press Club, the founder of the Telangana Hijra Intersex Transgender Samiti, Vyjayanti asserted her place as a strong

◀ Vyjayanti Vasanta Mogli

transgender woman activist championing the cause of her community.

"The efforts started as my own struggle for identity against the strong backlash of the society. The social activism comes along as my personal struggle," she said.

A post-graduate student of Public Policy at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, she stressed that there is lot of "internalisa-

tion" and "invisibilisation" of sexual violence on transgender people despite media coverage. She regretted that even the educated continue to stigmatise transgender community and shame them.

Describing the recent Supreme Court judgement, which conceptualised gender identity as emanating from the brain and not the genitals, as far sighted, she pointed out that

**"The recent Supreme Court judgement that re-conceptualised gender identity is far sighted. But not all States are implementing the verdict."**

the principle of self-determination of gender is crucial and the verdict, despite some flaws, recognises this notion. Vyjayanti pointed out that not all states are implementing the verdict.

"The media is unaware of the complexities of the legal issues surrounding gender identity, which needs to be examined." Also, the media fails to cover discrimination of the community in educational institutions and workplaces.

On many transgender people taking to begging and sex work, she said that these professions were their only means of livelihood. She expressed happiness that new avenues were opening up and credited the media for such a development.

Fronia Priscilla



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## REFLECTIONS

## Neha Dixit: Gutsy and espousing social causes

Davranova Mukhabbat

As a foreign student at Osmania University, attending the conference on 'Gender and Media: Continuities and Discontinuities' on what has changed and not changed for women in media over the years was an eye opener. Discussions on diverse issues such as tribes, media law and gender in media challenged me deeply. Of the several journalists gathered there, one of the brightest, intelligent, most outstanding, and the one who made an enormous impact on me was Neha Dixit.

My initial impression about her was clouded. During my background search, I discovered her to be a risk taker, self-assured, and highly motivated but after I spoke to her, I realised that she was modest, polite and kind. The twin facets fused in her personality astonished me.

Having grown up in Lucknow and completing her school, she moved to Delhi to study English literature in Delhi University. This seemed to be an act of courage on her part as it is not acceptable to the typical Indian family to send their daughter to study and live away from them. A master's degree in Convergent Journalism directed her to choose the professional path of a journalist.

What I found most exceptional about Neha Dixit was the sheer breadth of her interest in development issues - gender equality, social justice, rights of women, sexual violence, etc. After graduating from Jamia Millia Islamia, she started her career with *Tebelka* magazine. I realised that fighting for the rights of women was not an easy task for Neha.

The media and people like Neha are responsible for raising the consciousness of the oppressed and the downtrodden and show that women are as strong as men and have



Neha Dixit

strong opinions on everything including the government.

As she said, "If I have to write about women's issues, it is necessary to understand that women's issues also have to do with economics, politics and social justice. I think it may be tough in the beginning, but it becomes more and more important eventually as you end up producing your article or journalistic piece. Make the world understand that it can't keep underestimating you."

Since 2013, Neha has been working as an independent journalist writing for the *New York Times*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Outlook*, *Foreign Policy*, *Caravan*, *Himal Southasian* and several other national and international publications. I was deeply impressed when she said that resistance is the strength and power of people to fight injustice, stressing that it is far greater than anything else. That is what keeps people going, including herself. That's why reporters

should continue to keep reporting, she says, because ultimately, people are also resisting the same injustice that journalists are through their reportage.

The unfailing resistance of the people for their rights constantly motivated and pushed her to produce great articles over the years, she said. The stories "Lost children of the Prophet", "Operation Baby Lift", "Shadow Lines", which are landmark achievements in her career, have received widespread acclaim and won many awards including PII-ICRC Award, UNFPA- Laadli Media Award and others. The number of awards she won every year are proof of her hard work and her commitment to the nation and humanity. Her reports are evidence of her persistent struggle against sexual harassment, gender inequality, women's rights and social justice.

I think that, in future, this self-motivated, far-sighted, driven person, Neha will continue to work for the community with her stories. Her advice to young journalists, "Always learn to enjoy the work you are doing. And never lose hope, never become cynical, negative or pessimistic because a lot of people survive only on the hope that things will get better for them."

I believe that India should be proud of possessing such a courageous and ambitious journalist, who always keeps challenging herself, and at the same time keeps challenging others around her. As for me, a journalism student in India, the first interview I did was with Neha—an experience which not only showed me the initial steps to my future job, but also helped me understand the real essence of being a journalist I am very thankful that I was given the privilege and opportunity to interview the strong, self-confident and promising investigative journalist Neha Dixit, as she succeeded in changing the perceptions of a foreign student.

## Call for tough law to protect women at workplace



Tripurana Venkataratnam

## Fareesa Irshad

Tripurana Venkataratnam, Chairperson, Telangana State Women's Commission, has called for stringent laws to prevent crimes against women at workplace, and regretted the unethical media coverage of rape incidents.

Speaking at a session on 'Understanding the Labyrinths of Law' at Potti Sriramulu Telugu University, she said that though there are laws on domestic violence, dowry harassment, sexual and mental abuse, there is a need for stricter implementation. Tribal women, Dalits and illiter-

ates are victims in the majority of cases.

Citing cases of women being abandoned by their NRI husbands after marriage, she said, "We are requesting the Government of India to enter into bilateral agreements as far as NRI marriages are concerned." In this context, Ms. Venkataratnam urged participants to think of ways to force the government into taking action.

Manoj Mitta, senior editor, *The Times of India*, recalled recent instances where police and media played a key role in influencing public opinion and court judgments. Referring to the contempt law, he questioned the system of not recognising truth as a defence.

Prof. S.V. Satyanarayana, Vice-Chancellor of Potti Sriramulu Telugu University, welcomed the journalists and said he had great regard for women in journalism for their commitment to the profession despite hardships they face in the society.

C. Vanaja, senior journalist chaired the session and Prof V Sathi Reddy, Registrar, Telugu University was also present.

## 'Reportage on minorities skewed'

Chitra Saikumar

Reportage of religious minorities, marginalised sections including the Adivasis and women in the newsrooms came under closer scrutiny at a meet of 70-odd journalists at Osmania University recently.

In the session on 'Inclusive Newsrooms,' chaired by Sudipto Mondal, *Hindustan Times*, speakers focused on the targeting of minorities across the country and their portrayal in the media. Mondal pointed out that diversity in newsrooms and accommodating more people from the marginalised sections could improve the coverage.

Jyoti Punwani, a senior journalist from Mumbai who has been covering issues related to minorities, elaborated on the relationship between the mainstream media and minority communities, particularly Muslims.

She said that during riots, bomb blasts and terrorist attacks, reporters solely rely on the police for information. She felt that police stereotyped Muslims as pro-Pakistan, terrorists, fanatics and violent. Several Muslims who were arrested on serious

## 'Stereotypes and prejudice in the way news is framed leads to a skewed version of reality'

charges were often found innocent after years. Despite this, the police remain the primary source of information for reporters, she lamented. She pointed out how stereotypes and prejudice play a great role in the way news is framed, presenting a skewed version of reality.

Jeya Rani, Lifestyle Editor at *Dinamalar* in Chennai, while recounting her own battles with caste discrimination in the newsroom, stated that crimes against Dalits have been increasing at the rate of 10 to 20 per cent every year. In comparison, media space allotted for covering violence against Dalits has not increased. Terming the present era as an apocalypse of the media world, she said that media controls the entire movement of society. She further said that today, media organisations find news value even in a non-news issues.

Ms Rani pointed out that while there was a huge debate on the suicide of Rohith Vemula, the suicide of Ayyaru, a Dalit youth, was ignored. He ended his life as he could not bear the casteist violence inflicted on him, she said.

"Over 95 per cent of the owners of the mainstream media including print and television come from dominant caste backgrounds. About 70 to 80 per cent of the top positions are occupied by dominant caste men. Dalits don't constitute one per cent when it comes to deciding power in the country's media," she observed.

Akash Poyam, founder of the website 'Adivasi Resurgence,' pointed out that news articles on the marginalisation and atrocities were very limited. Citing the cases of death of over 100 Adivasi children in Malkangiri and deaths of tribal children in Maharashtra, Mr. Poyam said that news stories may have been objective or narrative, but they never examined the experience from an Adivasi's perspective.

He felt that there is a need for analytical stories which probe the root cause of the problems faced by Adivasis.



## ‘Showcase success stories of Muslims’



Jyoti Punwani

Can the media be appreciated for calling Muslims minorities? Is there any justification in blaming the entire Muslim community for terrorism?

Being a freelance journalist, I have been deliberately working on Muslim issues and I have found the media's coverage of the Muslim community inadequate. It fails to get more voices of normal people and instead showcases the voices of religious leaders and intellectuals. The media needs to think, considering the community as a whole, before it publishes something about it.

My parents were from Sind, Pakistan. But lots of our friends and relatives were anti-Muslim, and held a stereotyped notion about Pakistanis. This aroused a zeal in me to uncover the truth and bring to light the life led by innocent people living there

who had no connection with terrorism.

In my research, I noticed that Islamic practices differ from state to state. The Islamic culture seen in the north is different when compared to the south. The relationship between Muslims and Hindus is different in the South. When I go to the mosque and the others go to a temple, we still meet each other with a pure heart. This is particularly seen in the villages of Uttar Pradesh, but not in the cities. One should learn to accept and consider that people practising Islamic faith also belong to India just like anyone else, and are not a separate section.

It is necessary to explore Muslim women's issues in different states, showcase highly educated Muslim women and their success stories. It is very important to assess the psychological condition of the younger generation born much after the birth of Pakistan.

Women's issues have, likewise, caught my attention. In my perspective, women fighting for their rights to be allowed into religious places of worship should be made a priority. Many feminists ask me why it should be a priority when there are several other issues to be resolved. I say that women have every right to worship and why should anyone stop them? Why should only men be allowed to define what religion is?

(As told to Sushma Nagaraju)

### IN FIRST PERSON



## ‘It should be a voice of the voiceless’



Nishitha Jha

My father was also a journalist, so I tried not to be one; but I just stumbled into the field. My life changed a great deal after investigating Aarushi's case. It all started on a very personal note. Aarushi was a very good friend of my sister. Unable to see the trauma and depression that my sister was going through, I began investigating. I did not want to look at the issue as a journalist at all.

‘Trial by Error : The Aarushi Files’—the eight-part investigative audio series that I came up with, based on Avirook Sen's book *Aarushi*, and also my own investigations — was a new medium for me. I wondered if anyone would actually listen to it, but I think I was able to bring the same trigger in it like I do through my writing.

The whole idea is to try and figure out how to tell a story differently and in a simple manner for the audience to understand without difficulty. All

newspapers should be able to tell us what fear, trauma, recovery, courage, etc., feel like and that's the reason why most of my writings have a humanizing element. Only when a story is dealt with a humanizing touch, does it makes sense to the readers, and that's how they will be able to connect to it.

We can either report by sharing our own experiences or the family's or friends' experiences, but it is limited to your own world. There is a huge scope in brave journalism. One should always go beyond one's comfort zone, digging out facts that are not-so-obvious. Curiosity is something that never satisfies you.

I really don't believe in classifying my journalism as features, investigative or a particular genre— it all stems from an urge of being given a premise. I believe that there is little difference between journalists and people who want to do something for the country. Both become voices for the voiceless.

(As told to Sriveda Baswapoor)

## ‘Empathy is the best quality a journalist can have’

Vasanthi Hari Prakash

Go with an open mind and encounter the unexpected – this is what I believe in. I once visited a place near Raichur in Karnataka to report on pollution, but ended up making a story about the Devdasis there. I happened to find a group of them holding a protest as the government was neglecting their needs. Titled “God's Women or God forsaken Women?”, it was a story which I hadn't planned at all; I just probed into something that caught my attention, but I was able to bring out this story to the national audience.

When it comes to my writing about women facing sexual harassment at the workplace for Bangalore Mirror, I realised that it was mostly to do with the mindset. It is not straightforward as we think, it is a question of caste conflicts, a question of how women are treated by upper caste men who thought they could take their revenge against this lady and how they never



expected her to fight back. Despite the hardships, the victim fought for justice. All that then led to the Visakha judgment, which has benefited many women.

These are social ills and attitudes that we must write about as journalists.

As Linda Chhakhuak says, you should internally believe that your reporting can change things and that your journalism will make a difference to the world around you, even though the change might not be overnight. One thing I wish is that younger journalists should attend more talks, read more books, travel more, learn more, soak in more, absorb more and talk to the general ordinary people around them more – that is the beginning of the making of a good journalist. The biggest quality that you can have is empathy and if you also understand where the other person is coming from, then the story will be much deeper rather than just looking at it from your view point.

(As told to Anantha Lakshmi L & Jeevan Shada)

Raksha Kumar

Freelance wasn't my choice but I was pushed into it. As staff, I could not do stories like the ones I am doing now. I chose freelance journalism so that I could put my stories across. It is a different ball game for women in this field. Every story should be looked into from the perspective of gender sensitivity, which is a little challenging — for instance, when covering agricultural issues, where farming and agriculture are dominated by men. There, men and women take it in a different way when another woman approaches them to learn about them and the problems they face.

The minute a story is picked up, it makes certain powerful people uncomfortable and they may go against it. So generally, receiving threats is commonplace for a journalist. When I worked in Israel, the threat was



very high and the threat there is irrespective of gender. I have been lucky as I had supportive editors. I did not write against the district collectors in my city and I live in anonymity.

I wrote stories for national and international media organizations. Processing of news for the international and Indian media is different. While writing for international media, one needs to explain to readers the details about India.

It gives me a great sense of satisfaction to cover areas of my interest such as conflicts relating to land, mines, forests, and stories on gender. But given time, logistical and financial constraints, it is difficult for journalists to unravel all the layers of an issue arising out of such conflicts.

I have travelled extensively

and reported from 19 states. Among the states I travelled to, stories from Chhattisgarh were difficult to ignore as the mainstream media did not pick them up the way it had to. In the southern side of the state, villages are grappling with the presence of heavy presence of security forces. Despite that, there are still ways to bypass them and get the stories.

I had an insightful experience while covering a series of rapes in the Jind district of Haryana. The rapes were sanctioned by the Khap Panchayat. Even now, women there are not allowed to go out alone, speak to men, and should not venture out after 5 p.m. I went to that place by myself and interacted with men in that village. Interestingly, men welcomed me as they wanted to share their point of view on women, which was extremely patriarchal. Even though I wrote a negative story on them it was an interesting experience.

(As told to Chitra Saikumar)



# ‘Atrocities are mostly the fault of state’

Chitra Saikumar  
Amna Ummul Khair

Academician at University College of Arts, Social Science and Commerce, Satavahana University, Karimnagar and also an activist, Sujatha Surepally has emerged as a strong voice for Dalits and women. In an interview to *Osmania Courier*, she shares the plight of Dalits and Adivasis in the State and across the country. Excerpts from the interview:

**Your PhD was on Dalit Women’s empowerment. Was that your first step towards becoming an activist?**

No, I turned into activist in the 1990s. While I was doing my post-graduation in Sociology, I did a lot of field work where I came across several issues related to Dalits and Adivasis. This made me take my first step towards becoming an activist. I wrote my first blog on the special economic zone at Jadcherla in Mahbubnagar district. I chose to work for my PhD on Dalit Women’s empowerment as I come from the same community. I knew the issues faced by women of the community.

**How have your personal struggles contributed towards moulding you into a strong activist for Dalits and women?**

Being born as a woman, you have to struggle; being born as a Dalit woman, the struggle is unbearable. I used to think that you can stand on your feet if you are educated or employed, but it is not true. We are still treated as



Prof. Sujatha Surepally

untouchables. People only like to see you as a doctor or engineer. Nobody likes to see you as an activist. Journalism and activism are not easy professions for Dalit women to choose.

**Do Dalit men also face the same problems like Dalit women do?**

Yes, Dalit men too face problems but not as much as Dalit women when it comes to class, gender and caste.

**Do you think that the word ‘Dalit’ must not be used as it leads to discrimination?**

Gandhiji used the word Harijan but it was rejected. Baba Saheb Ambedkar did not use the

word Dalit. In India, it is commonly used and I feel that the term has to be changed. May be one day when people’s mindsets change, the meaning of the term will also change.

**Who do you think is responsible for the atrocities against Dalits, the society, or the government?**

Mostly, it’s the fault of the State. Baba Saheb Ambedkar had lot of faith in the State. He brought in reservation system to improve the standard of living and to educate more Dalits. The democracy failed as caste has become a more dominating feature in society. The SC/ST budget was never spent properly. Girls’ hostels in Karimnagar are the best

example of governmental neglect. One cannot stay there even for two days because of the unhygienic food and surroundings. Students were taken to Malkangiri in Odisha to write a report on killing of Adivasis. Why do they need to go till there just to file a report, when so many Adivasis are killed everywhere? We are all responsible for this discrimination.

**The 2010 July verdict regarding the Khairlanji massacre cited the incident as an “act of revenge”. What is your take on the injustice meted out to Dalits in hundreds of cases by the Indian Judiciary?**

Injustice is everywhere. People are raping, selling videos of women and no action is being taken. Take the case of Shruthi who was killed by pouring acid on her private parts in public. In another incident, a Dalit woman was raped in Karimnagar and her video was recorded. The video was handed over to police thinking that it would be in safe hands but it spread like wildfire once it reached the police station. There is no safety, security or happiness for Dalits.

**You have actively participated in the movement for justice in Rohith Vemula’s case. Do you think the government has sidelined the issue by getting the caste issue into the picture?**

Yes, the government has sidelined the issue by bringing in caste. The Government does it always. Rohit Vemula’s suicide is not the beginning or the end. There are many more happening but they go unnoticed. Media will not show the reality. Another ob-

servation is that mothers fight for their children; but where are the fathers? This is due to upper layer dominance.

**You have fought against the Polavaram dam project. Do you think that the forest management plan and rehabilitation and resettlement proposal put forward for the displaced tribal families will do justice to their cause?**

Why should the tribals be displaced at all? Major dams have failed and there is always a model or alternative plan. Many videos show that these displaced tribals can’t find work. Therefore they go back to the forest.

**What kind of legislative reforms would you recommend for ensuring dignity of life and justice to Dalits and Adivasis?**

Reforms are not something to be approved on paper or to be talked about, but they have to be worked on. Telangana state happened because of huge sacrifices, not because of Sonia Gandhi’s or Indira Gandhi’s intervention.

**Do you think the mainstream media is reporting issues related to Dalits in a fair manner?**

No media house disseminates news fairly. It has been observed that the media is pro-government.

**Any new project in the pipeline?**

I will be writing an article on Tollywood actress Pratyusha’s mother who fought for justice for her daughter who was killed by her boyfriend Siddhartha Reddy.

## Accuracy, credibility key in ‘Breaking News’ era

Nomula Rajasekhar

“I’d be happy to be called a writer”, says Kalpana Sharma, independent journalist and columnist.

In an exclusive chat with *Osmania Courier* on the sidelines of the National conference of Women in Media held in OU recently, Ms. Sharma, with 30 years of experience in various media organizations, she recalled her career which started with the *Indian Express* in the early 80s under eminent journalist B.G. Varghese. “Varghese was a very democratic person and a good editor. He used to encourage freshers to think differently when writing reports”, she says. Working under Varghese for two years gave her greater satisfaction says Sharma, an activist and feminist. However, *The Hindu*, also allowed the same sort of freedom in work during N. Ravi’s tenure as editor”, she reveals.

In the past, women journalists were asked to work on the editorial desk. “They were seldom allowed to go out for reporting. We used to beg the editors to allow us to do a story”, says Ms. Sharma. Today women are filing good reports and have become role models



Kalpana Sharma

for the new generation, she feels. “There are many women journalists on editorial boards and at the top management levels in various media organizations”, she says, terming it a good sign.

On the contemporary media scene, ‘The Other Half’ columnist says that the media changed rapidly after liberalisation which saw the entry of private entities. This changed the equation in media, as profit became the prime motive without social responsibility. For instance, very few media houses report dowry cases, she says. “Earlier, the edi-

tor used to assign special correspondents to cover such issues. What is news today is what sells; what elite people do and what happens in important places.”

“There is a big gap between field and studio based reporting,” she said. That’s the reason Trump and Modi won the elections, and that’s why the media couldn’t predict the election results of the oldest and largest democratic countries in the world.”

Though we are in the ‘Breaking News’ era, accuracy, balance, and credibility are also important, she feels. Commenting on NDTV’s one-day ban that was later revoked, she said, “today, governments cannot digest criticism and that is the reason they want to ban news channels”

In her blog Ulti Khopdi, she touches on every topic— feminism, elections, gender inequalities, malnutrition, health and education. She has written two books and edited a book along with Ammu Joseph, which talks of the presence of women in media and their opinions on society.

She recalled a conversation with a woman named Lakshmi from Andhra Pradesh, a pavement dweller in Mumbai. “When I asked her why she bothered about casting her vote in elections when so many elite people did not come forward, she gave a brilliant reply saying that ‘If I don’t vote, how will people know that I exist in this country?’” ■

### CHAIRPERSON & SECRETARY, ORGANISING COMMITTEE OF NWMI HYDERABAD CONFERENCE



Prof. Padmaja Shaw



C. Vanaja

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# For media, small is beautiful

Blesson Abraham

Having smaller states is a good idea as far as the media is concerned, said Rama Saraswathi, senior journalist from Sakshi. Participating in the session on 'Is Small Always Beautiful?' focused on the benefits of reorganising Indian states, she recalled the problems faced by journalists of vernacular newspapers who had to conform to certain formats to please the "crowd".

Ms. Saraswathi pointed out that in Namaste Telangana, the word 'dawakhana' — the Persian-derived term for hospital — was not encouraged internally. Even the name of a features page, 'Zindagi', was frowned upon as being aligned to Urdu readers, despite Dakhani (the local version of Urdu) being widely spoken by both Muslims and non-Muslims in the region.

Chairing the session, Uma Sudhir, Resident Editor, NDTV, voiced similar concerns. "When English becomes 'national', every other language becomes 'vernacular'", she pointed out.

Prof. Kodandaram, Chairman, Telangana Joint Action Committee, said that the fight for a separate state was a fight between the privileged classes of coastal Andhra and the underprivileged classes from Telangana.

Giving a historical perspective

on the demand for a separate state, he said the demand started with an aim to promote greater people's participation. Hegemonic structure in the united Andhra Pradesh state is one of the major reasons that led to the fight for a separate Telangana state, he asserted.

"As long as the hegemonic relations remain unchallenged, the regional structures remain unaltered", he added. He felt that it was not right to measure a state's success based on its size, because each region has its own distinct features.

Ambedkar was the only person who insisted that the government should take account of historical, social, cultural, economical and social conditions while forming a state. If these factors are neglected and heterogeneous groups are incorporated into a single state, there is a danger of one group dominating the polity and social life of people and reorganisation becomes inevitable.

Elaborating on the vast differences between the princely state of Hyderabad under the Nizam and Andhra Pradesh under British Raj, he said that in the princely state there was no scope for political organisation because it denied people the power to question. But under the British Raj, literacy and agriculture were given due importance. This fact had a major impact

after the formation of Andhra Pradesh, because the people of Andhra became proud of their wealth, literacy and advanced knowledge in agriculture.

Kodandaram attributed the revival of the state agitation to government policies in the early 2000s, when the then Chief Minister of united Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu, allocated resources to the elite sections from coastal Andhra.

Now, with Telangana State a reality, non-party forums like TJAC would continue their role in building 'Bangaru Telangana' by aiding the government in framing people centred policies, he said.

"We will try to work for a completely different model of development. We are not interested in elections; we are trying to represent the people, influence the government so that appropriate policies are formulated."

Krishank Manne, a student leader associated with the Congress Party, lamented the sea change in the atmosphere on OU campus.

"The University was the nucleus of the Telangana movement. Now, pro-tests and slogan shouting are not allowed on campus", he said, adding that the presence of student political groups and JACs on campus are in the interest of the State.

## 'JAC always stood for the people'

Jacob Ross Bhoompag & V Hitesh Kumar

Academician and political activist, Prof. M. Kodandaram played a prominent role in leading the agitation for a separate Telangana. In an exclusive interview to *Osmania Courier*, Prof. Kodandaram, participating in a session on 'Is Small Beautiful?', aired his views on the future course of Telangana's progress and the JAC's role.



Prof. M. Kodandaram

so how small should a state ideally be? I would say that we should rather, focus on the process and the dynamics of state formation movements and the impact of the current situation in such states.

**During the movement, yours was a powerful voice against the government. How is the situation now?**

In the integrated state, the government was opposed to the division and therefore we had to challenge it. Now, the situation is different. In a separate state, obviously we need to open a dialogue with the government. We are hopeful that Government will listen to people's voice and try to frame policies to fulfil their needs.

**In the Telangana agitation, you were called the 'Telangana Poru Bidda' by KCR. But, today, why are his followers criticising you?**

It is quite natural, as we have been questioning the government, criticising their policies, asking for alternative policy frameworks. Obviously, there will be opposition; those in power do not accept criticism, particularly in India. We need to fight so that our voices are heard.

**The JAC played vital role in the formation of Telangana. What is the future of JAC?**

After the formation of Telangana, we decided to continue with JAC as an organization that will work towards people-centred development of the region. Some left the JAC to join a political party. But JAC believes in articulating the concerns of the people.

**The session "Is small beautiful?" focussed on whether having smaller states was better idea for achieving good governance. In the present context is it true?**

Even the smallest of states are badly administered, so you can't say that small is really beautiful. Secondly, small is a relative term—

## Under fire in the war zone

Chitra Saikumar  
Amna Ummul Khair

Rohini Mohan, is the recipient of the Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize and Tata Literature Live! First Book Award. Her initiative to cover the conflict in Sri Lanka resulted in an award winning book, *The Seasons of Trouble*. She shared her experiences of undercover investigative reporting with *Osmania Courier*. Excerpts from the interview:

**Kindly elaborate on the contents of your book 'The Seasons of Trouble.'**

It was an undercover investigative story on the Sri Lankan conflict and its aftermath. Before I embarked on a journey to Sri Lanka, I did extensive research about the place and the people there. It took me a lot of time to build trust in people and get their stories. I spoke to several Tamil Tigers and gathered information relating to the civil war.

Women were more forthcoming with their stories, and they probably did so because they felt that being a woman myself, I could empathise better. After listening to many of them, I zeroed down on two women and a man. I was able to interact better with them, and could identify with their struggles. I made them feel comfortable and won their confidence. That's how they recounted



Rohini Mohan

their experiences.

**Can you shed light on undercover reporting in Sri Lanka your efforts to gather so much data?**

It was not an easy task for me to gather details. I used to observe people, talk to them and I had to make them feel that I was also just like them. I used to photograph everything I saw, and take down notes on minute details. There was an instance when the locals suspected me. They came to my house in my absence, ransacked and took away the books with valuable information about the conflict. Luckily, I could recollect details from the photographs I had taken. They included places I visited and people I had met. Had they found my camera, things

could have gone out of hand.

**Have you delved into the ways war affects the psyche of children?**

Yes. They looked fearful and disturbed while recollecting incidents. One of the protagonist in my book is Mugil, a thirteen-year-old girl, who joined the LTTE movement as.

**How do you see your journey in this field so far?**

I was just dedicated to the profession and worked very hard. In the beginning, my parents were quite worried about my choice of profession. So, when I was studying in Goa, I started working as a reporter too in my free time, without my parents' knowledge. Later on, my husband who is also a journalist turned activist, supported me in pursuing my passion. However, after bagging the award, my parents who had earlier been sceptical about my profession, felt proud of me. Now, they understand my capabilities and support me entirely.

**Any tips for budding journalists?**

Once I was told my reports were not worth publishing and at times I was let down. But I never gave up. In fact, those situations gave me more strength to work on tough reporting. So never get disappointed and leave your profession.

## High impact stories more gratifying, scribes say

Anantha Lakshmi Latchayya

Journalists have their highs and lows reporting on diverse societal issues. But some stories give immense satisfaction and all the travails piecing information together pale into insignificance for their impact on the lives of people. *Osmania Courier* quizzed a few scribes at the conference on the most satisfying assignment in their career.

Kavita Muralidharan, Associate Editor of *India Today*, feels that the assignment on reporting the conflict situation in Sri Lanka was most satisfying.

"I think the most satisfying story I have done was on the real agenda of the Gates Foundation", says Sandhya Srinivasan, Mumbai-based journalist and researcher. Sandhya's story that delved into how the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation influenced public policy through Product Development Partnerships (PDPs) that reaped commercial profits, while putting at risk the health of millions in underdeveloped/developing countries.

Suchitra, from Kerala, finds that her coverage of the tribals in Attappady, Kerala, gave her the most satisfaction. "Kerala is supposed to be a developed state, but there are several remote places

like Attappady which do not have basic government healthcare services, resulting in high mother and child mortality in these areas", she says. Her story, "Remote adivasis face health care chasm" appeared on the e-magazine, *India Together*. Chitra says that her reportage of farmers' widows turning to organic farming for a better livelihood was the most gratifying of all.

While Ritusmita Biswas feels that her most satisfying story is "Urban Human Health", which also got her the Laadli Award, Divya Arya cites that her best story was on online shaming that was driving women to suicide.

Tulasi singled out her coverage of farmers' suicides, and investigative reports on Antarani Bathukamma.

In stark contrast, "I think that my series of stories on caste-based honour killings of Dalits, which I have been writing since 2011, made the most impact", says Chennai-based scribe Kavin Malar, who also had to face online harassment for her fearless coverage of Dalit issues.

Senior journalist K K Shahina of Tehelka, says, "It was a rewarding experience to cover the 'mercy killing ritual' of the aged practised in Tamil Nadu, called Thalaikoothal."



# 'We must change people's perspective through our work'



Rajashri Dasgupta

Jeevan Shada & Anantha Lakshmi Latchayya

**R**ajashri Dasgupta is a senior journalist who has covered women's issues extensively during her impressive career. She has previously worked for *Business Standard* and the *Telegraph*. Her current focus is on sexual violence and state impunity in West Bengal. Presently the Editorial Advisor for *Himal Southasian*, she opened up about her work and opinions in an interview with the *Osmania Courier*.

**Why are women's pages and feature pages mostly headed by women? Does it really affect the perspective?**

It's been passed on since ages that women understand women better, therefore they would be able to take up their issues. But we had to fight for this space and that's when we felt that the women would be able to portray women's problems, their successes and celebrate women's lives. We would like women to head the desk for women's pages, with the decision making powers and we would also like men to contribute to these pages.

**As a journalist working for Business Standard and The Telegraph, did you have any differences of opinion with your editor-in-chief while covering any issues?**

In fact, my first article on women was written in *Business Standard* and at that time—in the 1980s—women's issues were never written about and *Business Standard*, being a business paper, couldn't even think about it. But I begged my boss to just have a look at the piece and it was published. He was quite happy about it and quite encouraging. It was also about breaking a mindset and my colleagues were quite encouraging when they read the article. It was on International Women's Day, and how women could be out protesting on the streets! Today, it might seem quite routine, but in the 80s, women's groups had just started such protests in different cities and celebrating International Working Women's Day. Writing about this was quite new to Business papers so the Chief Editor was very happy about the story.

In *The Telegraph*, we already had a women's page for which I was the editor. At that time, it was a four page weekly issue and we did get tremendous support initially from the editors because we wanted to write beyond rape and dowry issues—not only as women's issues, but as so-

cial issues; about work, about everything connected to women—from art and culture to books. So we tried to expand the scope of the page, and I think to a large extent we were successful, because there was an excitement around those pages. They were very popular until the advertisement department felt that 'No, we need different kinds of ads' and so on; and those pages got shut down since then.

**Can you tell us the problems and issues that you faced while interacting with your sources when covering the unethical drug trials?**

Actually these are investigative acts, so you have to be smart enough to probe this kind of issue. You have to do a lot of homework prior to setting out, you must know exactly where you must go, whom you must speak to. And since you are trying to uncover facts which people want to keep hidden, these are not easy stories to do; these are not stories the other side wants to reveal or write about. It is necessary to be strategic in your approach and collect evidence which you might not be able to write about, but you have to retain such information to protect yourself against any legal cases. It's like a jigsaw puzzle where you collect the facts and try to fit them in. This kind of investigative journalism is very different from leak journalism, where you leak a story, and sensationalize it to break it. But this is like developing an event, taking an event or a news story and working around it, bringing a fresh perspective. I had to bring the story forward along with my arguments to show how unethical the drug trials had been, how these drugs were not supported by the government, and how the drug controller had no idea about it as it was done in a very stealthy manner.

**Did you face any threats from the companies which were carrying out the unethical drug trials? If yes, how did you handle them?**

These were not big companies. These practices were being carried out with the involvement of doctors. It was the doctors who were not keen to cooperate with us because they were carrying out unethical drug trials and they were also part of the larger international medical organizations that were conducting those trials. When I spoke to a doctor from America who was promoting this in India, he said that, to carry out these drug trials in Amer-

ica, it would have cost him \$20 million; whereas in India, there are so many women who are unaware of these practices because they are poor, illiterate and under privileged. If 10 women dropped out of their trials they could get 20 more or 30 more and these doctors were a part of it. Investigating the source of the drugs, I found that they were made in different places like Baroda and Calcutta, and transferred in the form of small pellets and used to sterilise women. Actually, it was not just a single drug company; it was more like entire right-wing groups who wanted migrant population to be cut down. This idea first came from right-wing groups in America, which was later used in Vietnam, in Bangladesh and India. Many doctors felt that this is a very attractive model.

**Was the Panos fellowship your first to covering women's issues independently without external pressures? How valuable has it been as part of your career?**

The Panos fellowship pushed me to continue writing on several women's issues. It's a supportive companionship through my career that helped me do a lot of good work. Somehow, it helped me survive when I was just embarking upon my career. I must say that this fellowship is an honor I have received.

**How was your experience working with Laxmi Murthy on the book "Our Pictures, Our Words"?**

It was utterly fantastic. Laxmi Murthy is my friend and we are in the same field since years. We have been sharing our ideas, thoughts on par with the same strategy. That is why we both came together to work on the idea of *Our Pictures, Our Words*. It is a book deeply involving women's issues. We both have an equivalent ideology, a design on this concept and our common interests, thus shaping the book. Laxmi used to disagree with my thoughts sometimes to rectify the errors, thus making concepts clear. It was a wonderful experience writing this book and a great time teaming up with Laxmi on this project.

**After all your efforts and years in this field, do you think that the scenario in South Asia has changed with respect to people's thoughts and stereotypes?**

I am still struggling to move ahead; my past efforts will not stop my struggle to bring out every women-related issue to the fore so that they may be resolved. I believe that my struggle in this field can cause a social change and so, I will not stop till I achieve a perfect outcome. There is still a lot of work to be done, and the mindset of the society is yet to change. It is not over until we change people's perspective through our work.

**What made you switch from business writing to more specialised and particular fields like political and social issues?**

Before moving to other fields I started working for business papers. As a beginner, I got into business writing and meanwhile tried my hand at covering political and social issues. Though my career kick-started with business news, it was my dream to write on political and social issues.

**According to you, which is the most satisfying story that you have done till date?**

That's very tough to say. Because I feel that every story is important and picking just one is very hard, because I have put in my best for every story.

**What advice do you have for budding journalists?**

Students and young scribes must be passionate about fulfilling their dream. Students must focus on current events and be able to analyze and interpret the scenario and then give it a fine shape. They have to investigate the phenomenon, while doing necessary groundwork. Sometimes you have to overcome distractions and external pressure which can affect your career; if you succeed, consider your challenge worth winning and a great experience to learn from, as you may always face further obstacles. ■



# ‘Social inclusion vital in mainstream media’

Anantha Lakshmi Latchayya & Jeevan Shada

**S**udipto Mondal of *Hindustan Times* passionately reports on Dalit issues, minority rights and caste discrimination. His discerning reportage of the Rohit Vemula case was lauded for its in-depth inquiry. In an interview to *Osmania Courier*, Mondal talks about his career, his stories on Dalits, and his upcoming book on caste atrocities.

**Your story on Rohit Vemula was widely appreciated. Why did you think of exploring his background, his family and village?**

It is very important for Dalits to enter journalism so that they can provide an accurate view of the lives of other Dalits. So, for me, the moment I read Rohit’s letter, I was stirred inside that the boy was from my community (Dalit). How did he come this far, and how did he write such a beautiful letter? Who was he?

I was sent from my office in Bangalore to Hyderabad to cover this issue and I was under pressure from my editor to file the story on time. But when I reached Hyderabad Central University, there were hundreds of journalists focusing on the next political leader as well as the views of the Prime Minister and the Chief Ministers of different states. I felt, I wouldn’t be able to file this report as breaking news. I could not stay at Velivada where the protest was being staged. So I went to Guntur and found that there wasn’t a single journalist who was probing about Rohit, his family background, etc. All that was needed was to feel curious about this boy; and the only advantage I had over others was that I am a Dalit myself.

**There must be a lot of Dalits who want to come forward. How do they raise their voices?**

A country as racially divided as the USA could manage to organise their own important journalism collectives. The American Society of News Editors (ASNE) resolved that more coloured people and racial minorities need to be included in the mainstream media. And in India, where we pride ourselves to be a country with a far more vibrant democracy, where we profess to be better and more inclusive than the USA, there is not one editor who will say that in the next ten years ‘I will get at least three Dalits and Adivasis into the newsroom’. And that is where the change must happen. It is not that there are no Dalits and Adivasis aspiring for these jobs, but there are several artificial barriers. You can’t assume that people will cross the barriers and enter the newsroom; the editors have to remove these obstacles.

**Social discrimination, casteism seem to be at an all-time high in educational institutions. What measures would you recommend to improve the situation?**

In educational institutions, there is a lot to feel negative and sorry about. The next ten years will belong to Dalit and Adivasi intellectuals, whether people like it or not. In higher education, thanks to the efforts of student activist groups such as the ASA, OU Dalit groups, DMSU, DSU, etc., there are Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims who are venturing into education and they are the people who will become communist intellectuals. We are poised for a major change in perspective on social issues by intellectuals. For example, Dalit issues have always been viewed from the prism of upper castes because most of the scholars belong to that caste. But in the next decade, we are sure there will be several intellectuals who will enter the academia and



Sudipto Mondal

will bring a fresh perspective on society informed by Ambedkarism, Phule, Marx and Adivasi leaders. There are Adivasi intellectuals like Ram Dayal Munda who compiled a lot of Adivasi literature. These intellectuals have been inspired also by other forms of knowledge, and they are the ones who will change the face of academics.

**Do you feel that raising awareness on Dalit issues through media can bring down the atrocities against them? Will it help them have a more secure life or will it worsen their situation?**

There are multiple issues— one is the language of communication. There is inadequate coverage of atrocities on Dalits and Adivasis in the regional language press. There are small stories but these stories ought to be covered by the mainstream English media. That is where I see the change coming from. Secondly, Dalits and Adivasis are themselves reluctant to join the media. Typical Dalits / Adivasis who finish their graduation want to join universities for higher education and also appear for the Civil Services exams. But very few prefer the media field because they are aware that these spaces are overwhelmingly dominated by upper caste. At some point they have to take this decision to say, “Enough. We must stop opting only for civil services and academics, and join journalism.” A small beginning has been made but once that starts happening in the English media space, I think the issue of caste as a form of inhuman discrimination will be recognised the world over. Upper caste journalists have to start collaborating and help Dalits come into journalism.

**You are writing a book on Rohit Vemula's case along with other instances of caste-based discrimination. Could you**

**tell us something about it?**

I don't know how much I can divulge at this stage. Along with Rohith Vemula’s story, I also want to tell the stories of people who did not die. When Rohith died, the JNU campus was boiling. Leaders such as Kanhaiya Kumar, Umar Khalid, Shahla Rashid came out in his support. For them to be heard, all they had to do was open their mouth. But for Rohith Vemula to be heard, he had to kill himself and write a suicide note. It shows that there is greater acceptance of voices coming from a certain kind of background. Then, who will tell the stories of the boys and girls who are in the same situation as Rohith Vemula, but did not commit suicide? So through this book, I want to shed some light from the viewpoint of those who did not die. Apart from that, every minute detail about Rohit – who he was, where he grew up, his story, all of it will be there.

One thing I want readers to look out for is other people’s stories as well. I am trying very hard to include stories of his comrades, friends, and people in the ASA in the University of Hyderabad. In 1987, the ‘The Liberation Tigers’, the first Dalit organisation was founded in the University and it has an interesting story behind it. The Dalits in the ASA were in financial difficulties and weren’t paying the mess bills. They survived on the leftover food. One day, the Reddy mess secretary harassed the Dalit Adivasis who ate leftovers. He snatched the plate from one particular Dalit student, and said he'd rather give it to the dogs than let a thief eat it. “You haven’t paid your mess bills, pay them and then eat.” That Dalit boy had a muscular build, was used to hard labour in the fields, ate beef and was familiar with the ideology of Baba Saheb Ambedkar. He remained silent on that day but two days later 100 Dalit boys circled the Reddy Mess secretary and assaulted him.

Gandhian philosophy says violence is violence, no matter who commits it. Violence is a political tool that has been established across time, history to bring change, and used as a deterrent. And that is what the Dalit boys had done. They went underground and surfaced under the banner of ‘Dalit Boys Liberation Tigers’. I cannot judge whether it was good or bad violence. But as journalists, we have to put these things together and establish a story that narrates the victimisation of Dalits, which is what I am trying to do through my book. ■

**“Dalits and Adivasis are themselves reluctant to join the media. Typical Dalits / Adivasis who finish their graduation want to join universities for higher education and also appear for the Civil Services exams. But very few prefer the media field because they are aware that these spaces are overwhelmingly dominated by upper castes.”**



# 'Wish I have enough courage to return to Bastar'

Sushma Nagaraju

Journalist Malini Subramaniam, known for her courageous reportage of atrocities committed on Adivasis in Bastar, has said it is a "dangerous trend if journalists are not allowed to dig for facts and give expression to the voice of people in conflict zones."

Speaking at the 12th National Conference of Network of Women in Media, Ms Subramaniam observed that branding journalists as "Desh Drohi" ('anti-national') for writing about government "atrocities" is shameful.

"The police and state-supported vigilante groups harassed and targeted us for questioning their actions to combat Maoists by indulging in fake encounters. Innocent Adivasis were killed in the process and many had to endure sexual harassment by security forces", she said.

Ms Subramaniam, who won the International Press Freedom Award in 2016, remarked that



Malini Subramaniam

despite several laws and human rights charters being in place, there is no respite for the Adivasi communities in Bastar.

"The saddest thing is that the government itself has turned a blind eye. The police imposed all kinds of restrictions to pre-

vent journalists from carrying out their operations smoothly", she said.

According to her, Bastar is now more or less an open jail. "The police maintains a strict vigil on the activities of outsiders and puts them behind

**"What infuriates me is when other forces take advantage of Adivasis' simplicity."**

bars on suspicion of carrying out anti-government activities. Adivasis are branded as Maoists and arrested based on fake documents," Ms Subramaniam, who writes for the news website Scroll.in, revealed.

Referring to her eviction from Bastar and chants of "Death to Malini Subramaniam" that she faced there, she said, "It was an unpleasant and terrible situation. But I received tremendous support from my family." But the neighbours weren't as supportive, she said, because the police and the mob ran propaganda against her, announcing that she may plant bombs in the neighbours' houses. "Efforts were made to weaken me by targeting my family," she said.

Yet, her emotional connect with the Adivasis is strong, and nothing can deter her from working for their welfare. "Adivasis are the best people to learn from. In spite of all their troubles, they smile, sing songs and try to live in peace. What infuriates me is when other forces take advantage of their simplicity."

As to what inspired her to advocate for the rights of tribal communities in Bastar, she recalled her journey as a development worker on tribal issues. "I had worked with the International Committee of Red Cross in Bastar and found that the region had no basic medical, education and security services. Later, after the Red Cross discontinued its work, I continued my efforts to provide basic services to the Adivasi community there. I decided to narrate their stories and report on the state facilitated violence in Bastar."

"I wish I have enough courage to go back to Bastar", she concludes. ■

## From picking firewood to breaking news

Sriveda Baswapoor  
Fronia Priscilla

Jayanthi Burudu, the youngest tribal scribe from Malkangiri in Odisha had to travel by boat, train and bus to attend the Conference. She spent her childhood in jungles, picking sticks and firewood.

She owes her interest in helping the needy and social work to her farmer parents who inspired her despite their meagre resources.

Narrating her career journey, she said she chose journalism as it would help her work for her tribe and community. Despite the backlash from people, she struggled to pursue her degree in Mass Communication from Sholapur and is now working for her district. She feels that she is putting her education to good use.

Recounting her tragic experience of once picking two children from before the corpses of their murdered parents, she says her community suffers from a fear psychosis of police.

Jayanthi currently takes care of 8 - 10 children who were orphaned after their parents were killed in encounters and other violence, and provides for their food and education.

"I didn't know how resources would flow in, when I decided to help these children," she says.

Jayanthi's struggle and courage inspire many young tribal girls. She says that it is a matter of pride for her that the



Jayanthi Burudu

tribal community recognises her as someone who has made her way through in mainstream media. However, in her early days, the community had reservations about a young girl travelling by foot into Maoist strongholds for her journalistic work.

Her knowledge of the tribal language facilitated better understanding of issues from their perspective. She was able to express herself in Hindi and had no trouble relating to an English audience. She expressed her happiness at being able to participate in the NWMI conference. ■

## 'Oral histories are a must to document women's, Dalit stories'

Anantha Lakshmi Latchayya  
Jeevan Shada

Laxmi Murthy is consulting editor with *Himal Southasian*, the region's only political review magazine, published from Kathmandu. She also heads the Hri Institute for Southasian Research and Exchange, a unit under the Himal banner, conducting cross-border research in a region fraught with political divisions. Edited excerpts from an interview she gave to *Osmania Courier*:

**What made you choose conflict areas, press freedom and gender and media as your subjects of interest?**

These are areas that are less talked about. I started my career doing stories based on gender and marginalised communities. There's a myth that India being a democracy, there is a totally free press. Until 10-15 years ago, there were very clear "no go" areas defined: as to what you could or could not talk about. In India, for example, none of the perpetrators who have killed journalists have been brought to book, which points to a systemic problem. But this is gradually changing. Also, working with the International Federation of Journalists, I could cover issues related to gender equity and press freedom.

**What similarities and differences do you find in the social issues faced by women in Nepal and India?**

In South Asia, there are a lot of similarities because of a shared colonial history, laws and cultural issues. In Nepal, women have always been in the forefront of



Laxmi Murthy

every democratic movement without exception; but they are filtered out once the movement becomes stable, especially in decision-making. Now, there is a conscious attempt in political and administrative bodies to include more women. However, inclusion is viewed as a serious issue in Nepal, compared to India, where it is assumed that everybody will come up and do well on their own, given the opportunity. There is a lot of resistance towards the reservation system as well, with assumptions that there is no need for affirmative action. In Nepal, there is a conscious effort towards affirmative action.

**How important do you think is the role of oral history in documenting women's struggles and their stories?**

Oral history is extremely important and is one of the techniques to record historical narratives of communities that are not so well-connected with the rest of the world. Using the written form will not achieve as much as oral accounts, especially in the case of women, indigenous people, and Dalits. Histories are

**'Histories are getting lost and dying out slowly, with the death of the older generation.'**

getting lost and dying out slowly, with the death of the older generation. A lot of stories are actually in people's heads, which need to be shared.

**As the head of Hri Institute for South Asian Research and Exchange, what kind of research do you feel would address cross border issues?**

Generally, even in magazines now, there is a perception that people want shorter pieces as attention span is low. In *Himal*, long form journalism is preferred, with in-depth, investigative pieces of 1000-2000 words. The Hri institute also aims to be a platform to discuss issues which are not commonly discussed in South Asia. For example, we just wound up a conference, on "drone warfare" and had human rights activists and experts coming in from Pakistan, Afghanistan, discussing the impact of drone surveillance and drone warfare, and what it means to third world nations.

**What advice would you give to upcoming journalists?**

I wouldn't like to call it advice. They must follow their gut, heart, conscience, and instinct along with being confident. I feel that the older journalists need to take advice from the younger ones instead, and make way for them! ■